

The Nature of Leadership in the Church

June 2004

Preface by Joseph Tkach

Our doctrinal team is now examining what the Bible says about whether women may serve in the office of elder. This involves clarifying what the office of elder entails. One of the key scriptures under discussion is 1 Tim. 2:12: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”

One of the key words in this verse is “authority.” What authority is involved in the office of elder? Is this the sort of authority that Paul did not allow women to have? We will address the meaning of this verse in more detail in a future article, but in this article we want to explore what the Bible says about church leadership and authority in general.

Our doctrinal team has developed and approved the following article; I think it will be a helpful point of reference as we study whether the Bible teaches that we may ordain women as elders. The article discusses valid principles of Christian leadership no matter who the leaders may be.

Joseph Tkach

The Nature of Leadership in the Church

Jesus told his disciples, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:25-26).

In the church, authority must be viewed in a different way than it is in the world of government and business. Jesus did not say that it was wrong to lead, but that leaders should *serve others* rather than expecting others to serve them. They are to be motivated by love, not selfishness. They are to be humble, rather than giving themselves important-sounding titles. There is nothing wrong with *being* a benefactor, but it is wrong to call attention to how “good” you are.

Those who seek authority more than they seek to serve, no matter whether they are men or women, are not viewing church leadership in the right way. Church leadership is not a place to assert the importance of a particular person, ethnic group, personality type, or gender. Leadership roles are a means of service, not a means of venerating the leaders or the groups to which they belong.

Leaders in the church do have authority, and Christians are told to obey them, but that authority does not rest in themselves—they are servants “who must give an account” to God (Heb. 13:17). Their authority is authentic only as it reflects God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as described in Scripture.

God wants leaders to use their authority to serve. Paul twice wrote that the Lord gave him authority for building people up (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). That is the purpose of authority in the church. Leaders are to build up the church, edify the believers, and help them grow spiritually.

Responsibility to teach

Not every leader is a pastor, but for the purposes of this paper, let us look at what Ephesians describes as the role of a pastor. God gave pastors to the church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12). Pastors serve by preparing believers for service and helping them work together, so that the church grows (v. 16). This involves doctrinal instruction (vs. 13-14). Teaching is one of the main responsibilities of leaders who are identified as “pastors and teachers.” This is suggested not just in Ephesians 4, but also by the following points:

- Ephesians is the only book in the Bible to use the word “pastor” to describe church leaders; in other places the primary leaders of congregations are called elders and overseers—apparently two terms for the same role. The ability to teach is part of the description of an elder or overseer (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24; Tit. 1:9), but it is not part of the description of a deacon, suggesting that the primary responsibility for teaching falls to elders and overseers.
- The apostles decided that it was more important for the apostles to attend to “the ministry of the word” than to supervise the distribution of food. They viewed teaching and preaching as their primary role, and this focus on “the word” is apparently appropriate for elders as well.
- Paul told Timothy to devote himself to teaching Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13).

Elders should not teach on their own authority—they should “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2)—teaching truth in agreement with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. A message is “inspired” not by rhetorical skill or volume, but by whether it is true to the Bible, and by whether it leads people to faith in Christ. An elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Tit. 1:9). “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). Members are to weigh carefully what is said, deciding whether it is true to the gospel (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 John 4:1).

The authority of an elder is a derivative authority, as authorized by God. Leadership therefore begins with submission to God’s authority. When elders teach false doctrines or attempt to promote themselves, they are misusing the authority of their role. Their authority lies largely in the truth and their ability to teach it. That is the way in which members will be built up, being helped to become more like Christ.

Administrative authority

Sometimes, however, administrative authority is necessary. Since elders are to “take care of God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5), the elders usually have a supervisory role in the administrative matters of the church. Paul himself was involved in administrative matters when he oversaw the collection of resources to aid another part of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

Paul told the Corinthians that if he could not correct them through his letter, then he would have to come in person and “be harsh in [his] use of authority” (2 Cor. 13:10). He had authority, and he had already judged and instructed the Corinthians to expel one particularly blatant sinner (1 Cor. 5:3-5). He warned them not to associate with people who claimed to believe but persisted in certain sins (v. 11). He gave similar instructions in Rom. 16:17 and 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15.

Paul told Titus to “encourage and rebuke with all authority” (Tit. 2:15). If people do not listen to sound doctrine, they must be rebuked (Tit. 1:13). False teachers “must be silenced” (Tit. 1:11). For practical purposes, this must be done by *elders*—we do not invite heretics to present their case before the entire congregation (see 2 John 10) to see whether they should be expelled, just as we do not invite wolves into the flock to see whether they might devour anyone.

When false ideas are circulating, elders need to teach the truth and refute what is false, and do what they can to prevent heresy from being taught. Although biblical truth informs the judgment, elders must use their own judgment to decide whether the sins or heresies are sufficiently grievous to warrant this type of discipline, when repentance is genuine and reinstatement is appropriate, what level of confidentiality or announcement is necessary, etc. This administrative authority is generally given to elders, although it is often appropriate for elders to consult with their ecclesiastical superiors on such decisions.

Summary

Elders are to

- 1) train members for works of service, coordinate their work, and promote unity,
- 2) devote themselves to prayer and Scripture,
- 3) preach the gospel of grace,
- 4) defend the church against heretics, false believers, and divisive people, and
- 5) supervises administrative functions of the congregation.
- 6) anoint the sick (Jam. 5:14).

Elders also perform baptisms, officiate at weddings and funerals, and lead communion services, although these functions are not restricted to elders. The Bible does not mandate, although practical considerations usually do, that the elders be formally appointed. This is the function of ordination.

Peter gave this instruction to elders: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). Elders are not to use their position for their own benefit, but to help others.

God will judge church elders on how well they serve in these areas of responsibility (Heb. 13:17), and he gives them authority to serve in these ways. He also gives spiritual gifts that help them lead.

Pastoral gifts

There are many types of spiritual gifts, Paul told the Corinthians, but they are all given “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Although the gifts are different, they “are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (v. 11). God distributes these abilities so that we might grow by helping one another.

Paul explained, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Rom. 12:6-8).

Elders would find any of these gifts useful, but not all elders are equally gifted in each area. Some are gifted speakers, some are helpful with physical needs, some are good at explaining doctrine; some are very motivating; some are very generous with their time and other resources; some are great personnel coordinators; and some are good at hospital visitation. Elders generally start with some of these skills, and grow in the others as they gain experience. No matter what gifts they have, they are to use them to help others (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

When applied to elders these gifts can be deemed as “pastoral” gifts, but the presence of these “pastoral” gifts does not automatically qualify a person to be an elder—particularly when others in the congregation are even more gifted. Pastoral gifts may be used in a variety of roles, such as in children’s ministry, lay counseling, or in leading a small group. An elder should be gifted by the Spirit, and responsive to the Spirit in using those gifts. As a practical matter, for spiritual leadership to be effective, the congregation should agree 1) that the person is gifted for pastoral service, and 2) that the person is submissive to the Spirit.

Qualifications

What skills do elders need? Paul gave some guidelines about the people to be appointed: “The overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

“He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (1 Tim. 3:2-7).

This is an idealized portrait, as we can see by a comparison with the similar list in Titus 1:6-9. Since Timothy was working in an older church, Paul said that an elder must not be a recent convert; but he did not specify this for Titus, since the churches Titus was working with were new. Paul himself had appointed elders in new churches (Acts 14:23), which means that he appointed new converts, because those were the only people who were available.

Therefore, when Paul told Timothy that an elder must not be a new Christian, he was not creating a rigid requirement for all future churches. This shows that the items in his list should be seen as important guidelines, but not as absolute requirements. For example, elders who have already served well would not be automatically disqualified by a disobedient college-age child. All the factors should be taken into consideration.

We should also comment on what it means to be “the husband of but one wife.” This is not talking about polygamy (which was very rare). Nor does it disqualify single men and remarried widowers, although a literal reading would disqualify both. The term (literally, “a one-woman man”) means a man who is faithful to his wife rather than having a mistress on the side (which was common in Greco-Roman society). There was no stigma attached to a widower who remarried, nor to a man who was legally divorced and remarried. What was important for Paul is that the elder, if married, would be faithful to the woman he was married to.¹

¹ Further information on this is in Craig Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Hendrickson, 1991), chapter 7: “Can Ministers Be Remarried?—1 Timothy 3:2”; see also the discussion in

Practical considerations

Ordination as practiced by most churches today serves biblical goals, for it involves a formal ceremony in which people are appointed as congregational leaders, and the congregation asks God to help those leaders as they serve the congregation in the work of God. A formal ordination acknowledges that 1) leaders are not self-appointed, and 2) other Christians agree that these people are gifted and called by God to a leadership/service role. Formal appointment helps a person not only lead within the congregation but also represent the congregation in the community.

If a person claims to be gifted and called to the role of elder, but the congregation does not *look* to that person for leadership, it is likely that the person has misunderstood the call. Since the *fact* of service is more important than the title that is given, such a person should serve in other ways, and perhaps in time the person or the congregation will come to see the situation differently. Not everyone who claims to have pastoral gifts is really called to be an elder.

The selection of elders is a practical matter as well as a spiritual one, and it is affected by social expectations, since leadership itself is a social phenomenon dealing with the functioning of a group of people. Paul wrote that an elder should have a good reputation even among unbelievers. Consequently, cultural matters *must* be considered, and it would be a mistake to appoint someone who was not respected in the particular culture, and it would be a mistake to appoint anyone who was unable to win the respect of the congregation.

Conclusion

This article is not a complete “theology of church leadership.” It is designed to survey some of the more important points so that we know what is being discussed when we discuss whether the Bible teaches that women may serve in the office of elder within the church. This overview does bring out certain points for our study:

- We should not ordain anyone on the basis of gender alone. The person has to have the appropriate spiritual gifts, and the congregation must accept the person’s leadership.
- Since a church leader must be under the authority of Scripture, we cannot ordain women as elders if Scripture does not allow women to serve in that role. At the same time, we cannot exclude women from serving as elders if Scripture does not prohibit it.
- Since teaching is vital to the role of an elder, we should not ordain anyone who cannot effectively communicate spiritual principles in a way that edifies the listeners.
- We should not ordain anyone who is spiritually immature, self-seeking, theologically unbalanced, notoriously disobedient, or abusive with authority.
- We should not ordain anyone who has a poor reputation in the community.

In future articles, we will look more closely at what Scripture says about the role of women in church leadership. Our next article will examine Genesis 1-3.

